

FEMINIST RECLAIMING OF THE POPULAR: HOW TO CUT ACROSS HEGEMONIC BINARIES IN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS?

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Abstract

The present paper is a contribution to feminist research in cultural studies that contests the allegedly incompatible relationship between entertainment and state politics, challenging the unproductive denunciation of the coupling of politics with popular culture. My argument is based on the comparative analysis of two recent examples of the political media's attempts at gate-keeping intended to discredit woman politicians in Hungary and the US, trying to 'put them in their place'. The two cases are the coalition building by the so-called white-capped woman MPs representing all opposition parties in parliament against the 'slave law' in Hungary and the response to the six presidential candidates of the Democrats for the 2020 US elections. I will conceptualize the two allegedly distinct fields of politics and popular culture as intersecting by pointing out a shared logic of spectacular communication at work in both as defined by Guy Debord (2006). In terms of methodology, I will argue that a comparative analysis in search of an overlap both between popular culture and elite politics and between the two societies entails a dialectical, dynamic approach to comparison. A comparative study is inherently multi-directional and cannot fix one of the social fields or societies as 'the' point of departure for the analysis. That fixation would make the selected element function into the 'obvious' measure, inevitably othering the one compared to it. A dynamic, multi-directional approach to comparison can be best accounted for as a relationship of intersectionality enmeshed in diverse global cycles of communication.

1 Introduction

In my paper I want to contest the perceived binary divide between state politics and popular culture and challenge the denunciation of the latter produced by the logic of such a practice of categorization. Instead I will argue for a relative distinction of the two by pointing out that party politics and popular culture share the spectacular logic of communication of commodity culture. An important constituent element of that political communication is the prevailing practice of discrediting woman politicians when they are seen to be potentially successful in their progressive critique of the system both in Hungary and the US. The discrediting is performed by various associations rendered to belong in popular culture since it is regularly seen as a domain of 'femininity'. The exclusionary gender politics will be demonstrated by the right-wing media's hostile response to the 'white-capped women's' demonstration against the so-called 'slave law' introduced in December 2018 in Hungary and to that of Elizabeth Warren's presidential candidacy in the USA. Although the institutional

organizations of gender and gender politics in the two societies are not a simple matter of equivalence, nor do the regulatory practices in the two geographical spaces constitute identical discourses of normalcy, I still believe that a comparative analysis is methodologically valid and can contribute to an understanding of the gate-keeping mechanisms of the media in both spaces in their own distinctive ways. In spite of the differences of the distribution of the meaning-making practices in the two social spaces, the radical multiplicity of the political field of the 2010s may still support the explanatory power of a transformative use of Rosemary Hennessy's (1995) conceptualization of gender and the regulation of its visibility, as discussed in Section 2 below.

2 Intersectionality and comparison

Methodologically speaking, my analysis entails a dialectical, dynamic approach to doing a comparative study. It entails above all a comparison that does not fix the analytical point of departure, in this case a priori in the US cultural and political space. That decision would inevitably turn the specificities of the US into 'the' ideal measure, attributing to it a necessarily more advanced, more democratic formation – retroactively 'proving' the a priori values implicated in the researcher's decision. A dynamic approach to comparison rather assumes partial similarities between the two societies and in turn a complexity of the attempts at minimizing the relevance of the emergence of women politicians in elite politics in both countries. What I am interested in is to trace the ideological attempts of the media at rearticulating these women's left-leaning progressive policies as an act of credibility because 'they are caring for the future of their children.' The intersectional approach to social conflicts allows me to reveal that the discreditation is not merely a matter of culture (care in association with mothering) but also a political struggle over participation on an equal footing. This way the very measures of comparison come to be internally diverse and relative to the specificities of the given society, successfully disrupting and exposing the semiotic horizon of 'care' in contemporary (US as well as Hungarian) consumer society in a way where social power in delineating gender difference is no longer the power of domination but 'the source of political empowerment and social reconstruction' as argued by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994, p.93). At the same time, due to the intersection of multiple power relations, the change in the point of departure for comparison will not end up in an absolutist valorization of plurality either, precluding any comparison on the grounds of incomparable local specificities. The comparison will result in the possibility of exposing shared global tendencies traversing the various formations of commodity culture in the two countries and will show that matters of various social conflicts equally tend to be 'dressed up' as matters of presentation and appearance in the eye of the citizenry, while diverting the imaginary spectator's gaze from a more substantial structural critique of the event in question.

My analysis will demonstrate that what the two spaces have in common – in the name of credibility – is the strategic appropriation of femininity as a matter of popular cultural entertainment of fashion or (motherly) care safely contained under the sign of Guy Debord's (1994/2006) concept of the 'spectacle'. According to him, social lives are ruled by commodity relations, even if to different degrees where imaginary "[woman politicians'] life presents itself as an immense [self-evident] accumulation of *spectacles*" (Debord, 2006, p.12). Therefore, it is very difficult to argue for an alternative gender politics that should challenge the normalizing account of commodification. However, through deconstructing the alleged divide between politics and popular culture we may provide a social account of gender identities

that are not to be seen as a matter of individual choice of 'lifestyle' on display but of a historically contingent social position under the conditions of commodity culture to be challenged by addressing structural (institutionalized) ways of living.

The value of an intersectional comparative analysis is therefore twofold. Firstly, it lies in its potential to engage the very concept of difference in a political frame rather than suppressing or amplifying it within normalized hierarchies of consumerist 'style'. Secondly, this engagement does not necessarily result in a wholesale discreditation of identity either. Insofar as our political objective is to "imagine [...] a liberal polity whose price of inclusion [of gender difference] does not demand erasure through assimilation," as Linda Martin Alcoff (2006, p.84) puts it succinctly, we cannot disregard but need to understand the function of identity in the particular power struggles. In commodity culture, where identity comes to be "visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them" (Alcoff, 2006, p.5), we cannot simply embrace a post-modernist disregard of identity as an inherently injurious because arbitrary act. Instead, she proposes a move that subverts the binary opposition informing the most recent debate on the usefulness of identity politics. She argues for the need to expose the foundational logic of a self-evidently understood visibility and explore in its stead its situatedness along diverse vectors of power, so being able to acknowledge the role identities play in power struggles.

Following from Alcoff's and Crenshaw's observation, this re/articulation of identity in contemporary commodity culture involves then, I argue, the redefinition of the very meaning of visibility, the act of seeing itself. This consists in shifting the concept from self-evident experiential matter of appearance to materialized embodiment at the intersection of discourses and institutions. Drawing on Rosemary Hennessy's (1995, p.143) argumentation, 'visible' is what is an ideologically desirable cultural object to be routinely 'registered' as self-contained simple matter of display, while 'seeable' entails a critical exposure of the historical conditions of visibility including economic divisions of labor and wealth, political arrangements of state and politics fetishized by the glamour of the spectacle. An intersectional approach to comparison then means that we see the cultural/semiotic practices of meaning-making of 'woman' and the social, material (economic and political) practices of institutional organization of those meanings and activities associated with it in a dialectic relation, where the knowledge claims about what 'woman(hood)' should or could mean in association with the various cultural products are themselves interventions in what we come to know 'about' woman collectives and, reversely, will shape our social/material arrangements of such positions.

In other words, Hennessy (1995) argues that gender distinction is a social institution of categorization and one that is not the only domain that organizes and articulates the meanings of femininity (and masculinity): those meanings are articulated and organized in other domains such as party-political election campaigns and oppositional protests in my data, which events are themselves at the same time implicated as divisions of labor. Nor do femininity/masculinity distinctions only organize and articulate gender, but they may also produce implied meanings through a chain of associations, such as that of the 'political leader' or 'electability'. Making the implied, i.e. directly invisible meanings seeable by deconstructing the explicit, i.e., the apparently self-evident visible meanings of the '(real) woman politician' in the two political arenas and comparing their shared logic of (re)presentation may result in a feminist political subversion. This radical strategy challenges a short-sighted descriptive approach to analysis that ultimately reiterates the dominant ideology and feeds into "commodity's gravitation towards the new, the exotic, the spectacular" (Hennessy, 1995, p.161). In other words, such a political action takes the visibility of commodity logic at face value instead of exposing the structural effects of its production, and allowing for empowerment.

I hope that my understanding of Hennessy's differentiation of immediate display from the implied logic of visibility will support my intersectional approach to a comparative analysis, namely the need to expose the implied structuration of the multiple dimensions of the field of study, in my case that of party politics, that is played out explicitly in an allegedly immediate, visible manner in the field of popular cultural statements of fashion and appeal. The application of Hennessy's approach is twofold. On the one hand, it allows me to establish the nexus of multiple meanings, the dynamic play of said/unsaid statements without which no signifier may come to be intelligible in a given historical moment and cultural space. Secondly, it also opens up some space for a potential shift in the meaning of woman towards radical (identity) politics and away from the dominant lifestyle (identity) spectacle of commodity culture.

Although such a historical materialist intersectional approach to comparison would entail a systematic analysis of the institutional as well as the semiotic conditions of enunciation in contemporary Hungarian and US elite politics, my analysis, for lack of space, will focus predominantly on the semiotic dimension. I will expose the dominant logic of categorization practices informing the diverse meanings of woman(hood) at the intersection of the contemporary hegemonic formation of ruling and appearance through the perspective of 'spectacle'. This is a legitimate objective in so far as identities can be viewed as categories of knowledge that are rendered into meaningful orders of values as effects of dominant logics of institutionalized power, legitimizing what is meaningful and what is not or is less so at the given moment of political struggle for power.

3 Exposing the gender bias in discrediting woman politicians

Liesbet van Zoonen (2004) in developing the concept of cultural citizenship challenges the alleged absolute difference between politics and popular culture by pointing out their shared use of "the intense investments that audiences make in their favorite popular genres and stars" and its bearings "on the possible activity and involvement of people in the political field" (van Zoonen, 2004, p.53). Her approach contests the dominant binary perception of members of fandom enacting an affective appreciation/consumption of cultural objects of entertainment against a critical cognitive and active assessment of events and objects associated with the political activities characteristic of responsible citizens. "Juxtaposing fans and citizens in such commonsensical terms suggests that fandom cannot be a beneficial model for political citizenship; on the contrary, the passive fan and the active citizen are constructed as absolute opposites" (van Zoonen, 2004, p.61). Going beyond this hierarchical distinction of the two social fields prevailing in contemporary political discourse, for instance in the regular charging one's opponents (or enemy) with 'soaping' politics, van Zoonen introduces the concept of 'entertaining citizenship' at the intersection of the popular cultural and political in so far as both are shown to "rest on emotional investments that are intrinsically linked to rationality and lead to 'affective intelligence'" (van Zoonen, 2004, p.53). Although she does not refer to the earlier work by Paolo Carpi gnano, Robin Andresen, Stanley Aronowitz, and William DiFazio (1993), it is important to mention their discussion of the recent crisis of legitimacy in news media communication. Their major claim is that the response consists in the emergence of the ideology of the phantom public produced by the immediacy and the 'nowness' of the communicative practice of television news (Carpi gnano et al., 1993, p.103), resulting in the effect of an 'unmediated', direct relationship with reality between the events and the journalists and, in turn, between the media and the viewer. Carpi gnano et al. also point out that the divide serves to mitigate or play down the relevance of two major changes in news reporting, both making use of the structural specificity of the soap opera narrative where "The news

room becomes the location of happening and the reporting of the events becomes the plot of the situation (the difference between 'Murphy Brown' and 'Eyewitness News' might be only in the intensity of laughter)" (Carpignano et al., 1993, p.105). Carpignano et al. read this attempt at "counteracting the crisis of legitimacy of the news" by various structural tools of 'proximity', epitomized by the construction of the figure of the 'star investigative reporter' as unequivocally negative. Their perception of news (production) is set up against and over 'entertainment', such as 'soap operas', as the realm of the imaginary. I think it is an inevitable move since Carpignano et al. ignore the fact that the binary distinction is at the same time reinforced by the association of entertainment (and affect) with 'femininity' and the 'rationality' of the former with 'masculinity'. Note, nevertheless, the collocation of stardom and investigation, which resembles that of van Zoonen's 'entertaining citizenship', opening up to a less judgmental and potentially more subversive reading of the changes. Making explicit the importance of the gendered and gendering dimension of this reconfiguration of the public/private binary where what is at stake is the legitimacy of the 'news' embodied in the 'investigative' relationship of the journalist over (and at the expense of) the tabloid media worker. What is more, in so far as the media is the fourth estate of power, the concern over the media falling prey to popular culture is also present in the domain of governance, the other estate of power, whose practices of 'soaping' are the immediate focus of van Zoonen's analysis. She is giving an account of the ways in which the location of woman politicians at the intersection of public policy-making and gender makes their actual experience of discreditation qualitatively different from that of man politicians. To advance the telling of that location she draws on an intersectional approach to the structural intersection of the public domain of elite politics. The selective choice of certain popular cultural technologies of communication is explained as being governed by commodity culture's orientation towards appearance, but in such a way that it should secure the 'credibility' of the man politician, leaving his entitlement to the embodiment of the figure of the 'leader' unquestioned, functioning as the ideological limit to the appropriation of the popular by the political.

Celia Lury's (1996) reading of late modern commodity culture explains this ever-growing dominance of the spectacle. Her major point is that since the late 1970s there have emerged multiple and relatively independent cycles and sites for the production and consumption of things, each with their relatively distinct regimes of value. This is another way of saying that the importance of the market for the circulation of things produced or appropriated for exchange has immensely expanded. The relative independence of production and consumption resulted in growing (buying) power and authority being granted to certain groups of consumers, resulting in "[t]he special importance given to the consumption or use of cultural objects or goods in contemporary societies by specific social groups or cultural intermediaries" (Lury, 1996, p.4). I would argue that the greater the gap between the cycles of production and consumption, that is the greater the divide between the exploitative and 'ugly' nature of capitalist production and the appealing packaging and promotion of the commodities, the more likely it is for the commodities to be able to be decontextualized and reoriented towards 'luminosity' or 'looking good', which is captured by Debord's concept of the 'spectacle'. What is interesting to trace, then, are the ways in which this 'looking good', and with it the dominance of the art-culture field, crosscuts with gender relations. Why is this orientation to appearance and design (symbolic value) not seen as 'feminine' when it is associated with man politicians and their programs? Why does the use of emotionally charged images, when associated with female embodiments, work in more demanding ways to disarticulate their political messages from the spectacle and present themselves as 'authentic' politicians of substance and trust in the eye of the citizenry? These are the

ultimate questions guiding my analysis of the chosen press materials to see how this explicitly unacknowledged, yet indispensable work of gender plays out and emerges at moments when woman politicians appropriate the center stage in large numbers both in Hungary and the US.

I have chosen two similar moments from recent party-political struggles in the two countries. Both have to do with the potential power of women politicians when caught performing a kind of solidarity across their differences, hoping to make themselves visible on their own terms and have their voice heard. The Hungarian event is the protest against the so-called “slave law” which was passed by the governing FIDESZ (Young Democrats’ Association) majority in Parliament on December 12, 2018. The law entails several amendments to the Hungarian labor code: it raises the cap on overtime from 250 to 400 hours a year, and gives employers up to three years instead of one to pay for the work.¹ The US event is the unprecedented number of six woman candidates running in the 2020 pre-elections in the Democratic Party. The potential point of similarity between the two cases is captured by the question: what happens when ‘gender’ cannot be taken as an obviously given category of female sameness with a single token woman at play. The exceptionally high number of six candidates in the US and the thirteen MPs in Hungary coming from various opposition party factions inside and outside of Parliament successfully building a block around the particular issue calls for the recognition of internal differentiation within women; the actual political situation calls for an intersectional approach.

The Hungarian opposition has been extensively criticized for its inability to form a coalition against the FIDESZ-KDNP (Young Democrats’ Association – Christian Democratic Party) coalition in the last elections in April 2018, allowing FIDESZ to form a two-thirds majority government for the third time in succession instead of a simple majority. They have been accused of letting down the majority of the citizenry (52%), who voted for the opposition but whose votes were lost within the framework of the new electoral law passed in 2012, whose logic can be defied if and only if there is only one candidate of the opposition running against the one in power² (Bíró-Nagy, 2018). Against this history of division and rivalry, it was an unprecedentedly promising moment when the opposition parties, both the right and left wing factions, for the first time, eventually united against the ‘slave law’ on the day of the vote in Parliament, trying to obstruct the vote and then organizing a demonstration the next day. The protest march was to make the newly forged union visible for the public. Therefore, it is important to highlight that it was decided that this union should be symbolized by thirteen women, representing the different parties in opposition, literally leading the march – wearing white caps and shawls. The dress code was intended to be symbolic, to invite the citizens to see them as leaders of a ‘peaceful’, non-violent demonstration. Yet, very quickly, it was associated with the color of the suffragette’s movement as well.

Regarding the reception of the event, I analyze three quotes. The first one is by the ex-Prime Minister in the first center-right government after the system change in 1989, Péter Boross. He was interviewed about his opinion of the current political situation in the first issue of *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), the right-wing broadsheet in February 2019, when it was relaunched under new ownership after the parliamentary elections in 2018. He took the symbolic opportunity of the ‘restart’ to express the following reflections on the opposition in February 2019. Considering his position in elite politics, his opinion was taken to stand for the establishment’s view:

¹ The full text of the bill in Hungarian is available at <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/03628/03628.pdf>.

² For information on the processing of the people’s vote into actual number of representatives, see the entry on the voting system after 2012 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_Hungary.

With Western money, they want to tear down even the traditional gender roles. For instance, no matter how degenerated the political fights have been, or how shallow the discourse, these gross things were at least not linked with women. The casting of such vulgar roles involved men, who did meet the requirements of roughness. Now, however, women politicians take the lead in primitivity, in low class performances. That's what we could see in the scandal in the parliament or in the affray outside the headquarters of MTVA ('Hungarian Broadcasting Corporation').³ (Megyeri, 2019)

In response to Mr. Boross's interview, eight MPs, all men, representing all parties in opposition in Parliament, issued a Letter of Protest in support of their woman colleagues under the title "It is Péter Boross who is a disgrace" on the same day. It was an important gesture to reinforce the new coalition-building of the opposition, yet in terms of gender relations, their logic is contradictory. On the one hand, they (rightly) criticize the ex-prime minister for his silence when MPs are accused of physical violence against their wives or for his idea of imposing a tax on single women and for contending that the most appropriate place for women is the maternity ward:

Péter Boross has no words to protest when a politician from the government faction breaks his wife's nose and jaw, but calls woman politicians primitive when they stand up for the voters with reason. Péter Boross himself has taken the lead in arguing that a new tax on single women should be imposed and the only place where a woman cannot be replaced is the maternity ward.⁴ (Boross Péter maga a gyalázat, 2019 Feb 6)

Nevertheless, in the Letter of Protest the eight signatories see the woman MPs fight for gender specific 'issues' as if there were a gendered division of labor in the representation of the constituency:

The woman MPs in the opposition have stood up for the elimination of violence against women and children, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention [Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2011], and for the implementation of the Lanzarote Convention in Hungary [Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 2007].⁵ (Boross Péter maga a gyalázat, 2019 Feb 6)

The binary divide of sexual difference is further underscored in the closing statement – with an appeal to the 'real man', by implication of the signatories of the protest, who should feel ashamed if anyone speaks about women in the voice of

³ All translations of the Hungarian print media texts are provided by the Author. In the Hungarian original: "Nyugati pénzzel a háttérből le akarják bontani még a hagyományos társadalmi szerepeket is. Például eddig bármilyen elfajultak is voltak a politikai csatározások, sekélyes a beszédmód, de mégsem a nőkhez kötődtek ezek az ordenárásságok. A férfiakra osztották az alantasabb szerepeket, akik meg is feleltek ezeknek a durvasági elvárásoknak. Most ellenben a női politikusok viszik a prímet a primitívségben, a színvonal alatti akciók terén. Ezt láthattuk az országközi botrányokozás vagy az MTVA-székházban való garázdálkodás alkalmával is."

⁴ In the Hungarian original: "Boross Péternek egyetlen szava sincs, amikor egy kormánypárti politikus eltöri felesége orr- és járomcsontját, de primitívnek nevezi a női képviselőket, ha jogosan kiállnak a választókért. Boross Péter személyesen is élen járt afféle kijelentések megfogalmazásában, mint hogy szingli adót kellene bevezetni, vagy hogy a nő egy helyen nem helyettesíthető: a szülőszobában."

⁵ In the Hungarian original: "Az ellenzék női képviselői kiálltak a nők és a gyermekek elleni erőszak visszaszorításáért, az Isztambuli Egyezmény ratifikációjáért, és azért, hogy a Lanzarote-i Egyezményt végrehajtsa Magyarország."

‘disrespect’. This traditional perception of a man / woman relationship as ‘respectful’ simply cannot be undermined by the very intention of standing up for equality between women and men MPs:

Hungarian society needs strong women in the opposition as well. A real man never speaks like that about women. After an interview like this, everyone has good reason to feel ashamed on behalf of the ex-prime minister.⁶ (Boross Péter maga a gyalázat, 2019 Feb 6)

At the same time, the most vocal critical voices from the site of grassroots activism, self-identifying as ardent opponents of the populist political system, reflected on the event from the most misogynist perspective, degrading the event for its marketing:

The white cap and the white shawl were so effective that no one else was wearing them; only politicians. The Western press was enthusiastically celebrating the heroes and symbols of the ‘resistance’ against Viktor Orbán’s macho authoritarian power: the woman MPs wearing white caps and shawls. A priority role was given to symbols to which people could march: in addition to the eternal symbol, the Parliament, the headquarters of MTVA, the empty space of the Imre Nagy Statue, and the Presidential Residence in the Sándor Palace and Orbán Victor’s luxury office in the convent of the Carmelites [in the Castle District].

We have no option left but to dismiss and pension off those responsible for the two-thirds majority [in parliament], the privileged over the past thirty years; to change the elite: to set up a new party system.⁷ (Puzsér, 2019).

My key point is that the fairly widespread sarcastic tone exemplified in the quote above is mediated by misogyny. The profound disappointment with politics since the system change in general, and with the opposition in particular, is criticized not as a matter of institutional organization of power but as one of the generational incapacity of particular individuals, which is captured by the image of the opposition woman MPs, ironically, at a moment when they are at long last providing a good example for their male colleagues in the opposition to follow: uniting their forces over individual contentious party political gains. The sarcastic voice of overgeneralization, using women’s faces to stand in for the political structure, is particularly unfair in a country that has the lowest share of woman politicians in the European Union.⁸ What is more, the scapegoating of women is legitimized by accusing them of turning politics into a ‘stupid fashion statement’ instead of, presumably, dealing with ‘real problems of substance’. Although marketization is integral to structuring global capitalist production, one major institution of it is the fashion industry. The demands of the profit

⁶ In the Hungarian original: “A magyar társadalomnak szüksége van erős nőkre az ellenzék sorain belül is. Egy igazi férfi soha nem beszél így a nőkről. Egy ilyen interjú után jó oka van mindenkinek arra, hogy a volt miniszterelnök helyett is elszégyellje magát.”

⁷ In the Hungarian original: “A fehér sapka és a fehér sál annyira jól működött, hogy politikusokon kívül más nem is viselte. A nyugati sajtó lelkesen ünnepelte az Orbán Viktor macsó tekintélyuralmával szemben kibontakozó „ellenállás” hőseit és jelképeit: a fehér sapkás, fehér sálás képviselőnőket. Kitüntetett szerepet kaptak azok a jelképek, amelyekhez vonulni lehetett: az örökös szimbólum, a Parlament mellett az MTVA székháza, Nagy Imre szobrának hűlt helye, a köztársasági elnök hivatala a Sándor-palotában és Orbán Viktor luxus-dolgozósobája a Karmelita kolostorban. Nincs más, mint a kétharmad felelőseinek, az elmúlt harminc év haszonélvezőinek a nyugdíjazása, nincs más, mint az elitcsere: egy új pártstruktúra felállítása.”

⁸ For the exact figures see the appropriate European Union document on women in politics in the EU: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes>.

through 'fashion' not only targets particular groups of the population but "facilitates the building up of multiple social groups who define themselves through the assertion of a specific style" where the multiple goods externalize diverse personalities (Lury, 1996, p.48). However, as an effect of the sexist ideological perception of marketization, men emerge as the chief bearers of 'production' as if beyond and above the logic of 'consumption', which is made to look frivolous and as such dangerous only for women, who allegedly cannot resist its temptation. It is the ideological implication of gender distinction that saves the exploitative classist logic of the capital in place as well as the relatively autonomous space of state politics serving that interest at the expense of womanhood. In short, the politicians wearing the white hat and shawl, once exposed to the scrutiny of the male journalist, are revealed and represented not as self-possessed autonomous decision makers but as individuals possessed by commodity aesthetics – consumed, of course, by the gaze of men.

4. Gendering likeability

The stakes for women politicians in the US are similar: to be recognized as autonomous active agents; yet their struggles are played out in a relatively different political space. The ultimate test of their success is the presidential election. In the history of presidential campaigns, there have been altogether five women candidates, and each time only one woman competing with dozens of male candidates in the pre-elections. The 2020 competition is an historic break with that tradition. The six women candidates running in the presidential pre-elections are all Democrats. Their record is coupled with an equally unprecedentedly large number of women, 102 altogether, elected to the House of Representatives in 2018, of whom 35 are newly elected, according to the Pew Research Center (Desilver, 2018).

Breaking with the tendency which lasted until the early 1990s, the record number of women serving in the new Congress and the six women on the presidential-debate stages is a major visible change in comparison with the 2008 and 2016 elections, when Hillary Clinton was the only woman against a dozen male candidates running in the Democratic Primaries. The current media presentation therefore calls for a comparison with the reception of Hillary Clinton's first presidential campaign in the 2008 elections. Clinton's reception in the press back then can be read as an indirect act of homophobia that was part of a backlash against queer and feminist politics, within the hostile frames of an intelligibility that positions woman and political leadership as a highly contentious collocation. In my comparative study of that reception, I argued that it was a backlash against feminism overtly played out around the looks of Hillary Clinton, who was singled out for her 'obsession with the pantsuit'. It was read as her conservative 'failure' to accomplish the 'post-feminist' balance between looking properly feminine, i.e., 'sexy enough' without overdoing the masculine (Barát, 2011). The research question I am pursuing now is concerned therefore with whether the exceptionally high number of women and their ethnic diversity in the Democratic Primary may make a difference to the earlier gender politics of 2008, whether they can subvert the gendered politics of professionalism optimized in the concern about 'dressing for success' in Hillary Clinton's case. If so, in what other ways does gender bias play a role in the voters' perception and is that bias still mediated by popular culture?

At the time of writing this analysis the strongest candidate of the six is Senator Elizabeth Warren. She officially announced her participation in February 2019 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. It is a symbolic location to choose in that a group of women started a strike at Everett Mill there in 1912: "The senator drew on the strike as a story of women, many of them immigrants, taking on a stacked system and triumphing by gaining raises, overtime and other benefits" (Taylor, 2019). That history resonates

with Senator Warren's political vision and indirectly underscores the credibility of her class-oriented economic agenda: "It won't be enough to just undo the terrible acts of this administration," Ms. Warren said. "We can't afford to just tinker around the edges — a tax credit here, a regulation there. Our fight is for big, structural change. (ibid.). Meanwhile her male opponents, observes the journalist, such as "Buttigieg and O'Rourke — two men with relatively thin résumés running for president — have been piecing together their platforms as they run" (ibid.). How does this general concern for woman candidates' electability, i.e. their ability to beat Donald Trump in presidential office and planning to rerun for the Republicans, intersect with concerns mediated by popular culture? It is not that women are not considered qualified for the office at all; it is more like a scalar devaluation in that they are seen as 'less' qualified than men. In general, there seem to be strong doubts about the woman candidates' capacity as president in the 2020 elections. When it comes to gaining voters' trust, woman politicians have much more to overcome than men (Solnit, 2019).

Furthermore, this lesser degree of 'electability' is seen to be justified by being prone to be possessed by their 'emotions'. For instance, in a Suffolk University poll in April 2019, nearly 10 percent said that if the Democratic primary elections were held today their primary reason for not choosing Senator Warren is because "She seems angry."⁹ What is important to recall from social psychological research in this regard is that gender bias emerges in evaluative judgments of women in institutions that are distinctly seen as 'male' in character even if the actual women in that domain have successfully demonstrated their capacity, like Senator Warren in the Democratic Primary now. In those institutions, men, when angry, are not perceived as 'out of control' but as people who stand up and fight for their principles (Heilman et al., 2004). However, there is one important point that seems to escape journalists' attention even in mainstream US broadsheet papers when they are drawing on the various opinion polls. They seem simply to take over the results without reflecting on the design of the surveys that result in finding gendered bias in the data. For instance, it would be important to note that the opinion "She seems angry" in the Suffolk University questionnaire is not provided by respondents to an open ended question but by the researchers — probably to test their expectations — but it is even more telling to see that it occurs in the company of the option "She does not excite me" with nearly 11 percent in agreement with it. I think it is reasonable to assume that the meaning of 'exciting' next to the affect of anger easily comes to be associated with emotions, reiterating and naturalizing the biased gendering binary of 'if female then emotional' — and therefore less likely to act as a reliable leader of reason — versus 'if male then rational' — and therefore a self-possessed agent deserving trust. The opinion polls unfortunately do nothing but work hard at associating the woman candidates with the language of negative judgment instead of posing their question from a perspective that could cast doubt on the male candidates' performance as if beyond question. In my reading, this is the result of the unidirectional static performance of comparison, producing masculinity as if proven by 'facts' of research. This masculinized entitlement to — or monopoly of — 'objectivity' then serves to warrant seeing rational decision as the exact other of affect and the very essence of presidential duty — now made 'masculine' without any need to explicitly say so. At the same time, this binary divide will evoke the allegedly pure affection orientation of entertainment to the point where if a woman candidate's performance is smart, and she comes across as knowing the facts, she is seen as smug and all-knowing. (Solnit, 2019)

A telling and upsetting comparison in this regard may be the media perception of Joe Biden's performance in the same race. When preparing for his presidential announcement, Biden's team in a preemptive move disclosed the phone call (only

⁹ For the study visit https://www.suffolk.edu/-/media/suffolk/documents/academics/research-at-suffolk/suprc/polls/new-hampshire/2019/4_30_2019_marginals_pdf.

after 28 years!) that he had made to Anita Hill apparently to 'apologize' for his conduct when in 1991, as the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, in the confirmation hearings regarding Hill's accusation of Clarence Thomas, President George Bush's nominee to the Supreme Court, of sexual harassment, he did not support her. Anita Hill in an interview about this phone call said "she cannot support Mr. Biden for president until he takes full responsibility for his conduct, including his failure to call as corroborating witnesses other women who were willing to testify before the Judiciary Committee. By leaving them out," he said, "he created a 'he said, she said' situation that did not have to exist." (Stolberg & Hulse, 2019). What is upsetting to observe is the successful maintenance of the gender politics which prevailed in the hearings back in 1991. Despite the current success of the #MeToo Campaign, Hill's judgment that Biden failed to apologize has not put him second, behind Senator Warren in the Democratic race, but left her with the extra task of 'proving herself'.

My point is not that man candidates are not measured regarding their 'likeability' to the voters. However, power is not distributed equally. Likeability is read as 'attraction' and defined as superficial appeal of commodity culture when linked with women, while men's 'electability' escapes the logic of the spectacle and is evaluated as 'charisma' of innate substance, which in fact boils down to power and entitlement. I think it would be a major step forward in the US if the press that self-identifies as reliable and non-biased stopped focusing their discussion of the Primary in terms of 'electability', whose mere mention at the moment automatically discredits woman candidates. Instead, they should change the perspective of comparison to women's advantage and stop confining them to 'failure' with a focus on what they stand for, if you wish, for the masculinized issues of substance – after all, their policies are much better worked out precisely because of the gender bias that requires them to outperform the men in the competition.¹⁰

5 Conclusion

I have studied the similarities and differences in the ways gender bias shapes women's place in elite politics in the woman MPs' attempts at building an alliance across the different opposition factions in the Hungarian Parliament and in the 2020 Democratic Primary in the US. The media perceptions of politicians' activities in the two political arenas share an exclusionary gender politics that results in an inevitable discreditation of women with reference to the measure of 'authenticity' since it is indirectly structured by an ideologically invested distinction of gender. The relative difference between the two spaces can be pointed out in the visibility of the legitimization of this devaluation in popular culture. In the Hungarian case, not only are the standards much higher for women than for men – as is also the case in the US Primary –, but the value judgments are explicitly hostile and derogatory. The concern about the 'electability' of a woman politician in the US is covertly implicated in the concern about 'what makes a presidential candidate likeable'; this orientation to 'affection' triggers a chain of equivalences about a bodily, non-intellectual existence only when intersecting with female embodiments; in this sense sexism is mobilized only indirectly in the mainstream US press about the six candidates. The understanding of woman as 'spectacular image' in Hungary is drawn on explicitly and in its extreme even with pride when women MPs are shamelessly ridiculed for daring to claim entitlement to the arena of decision making of political leadership.

¹⁰ I mean something like Astead Herndon & Matt Flegenheimer's opinion piece in The New York Times on April 21, 2019, which articulates the question of candidacy from a perspective that prioritizes women over the white men candidates: "Should a white man be the face of Dems in 2020?" (<https://www.realclearpolitics.com>).

They are literally reduced to soaping politics into a catwalk of fashion statements – a direct move that is fortunately missing from the US quality media discourse, but is replaced by a systemic practice of confining women to failure even when trying to criticize the unequal gender power in favor of the man candidates.

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